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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are made for introducing students, especially those at the college level, to American short stories. An anthology of stories, chronologically presented, is noted as a useful text. Three approaches for presentation include historical sequencing, grouping according to salient elements of fiction, and grouping by theme. Pre-reading activities include discussion of the six elements of fiction (plot, setting, character, point of view, style, theme), author overview, and preparatory questions and vocabulary. Presentation of the story itself is enhanced by variety and enthusiasm, with techniques including reading to students; using a film or video, stories on tape, and theme- or period-related music; role-playing; and having students keep literary journals. Strategies that are especially helpful for a multicultural group are noted, including film use, close-captioning, and use of tapes with texts containing archaic language. (MSE)

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Techniques For presenting Short Story in the Advanced ESL Classroom

JULIA WILLIAMSON

Along with the renewed interest in literature as an instructional medium and the large number of convincing arguments for the use of literature in the ESL classroom (Oster, 89) has come the question of which literature to teach and what approach(es) to use. The linguistic and cultural sophistication of the students, as well as the purpose for the study, must determine the answers to this question. What follows are suggested means for teachers of literature—especially teachers in the college classroom—to introduce their students to the wealth of American short stories.

The first question is which of these stories to use and then, in what order to present them. The text which I use, Ann Charters' The Story and Its Writer, Arranges chronologically 107 American and international short stories, in this way placing the authors in historical perspective and offering a look at the development of the short story over time. Another approach is to group the stories according to the elements of fiction which are most salient in them. For example, the setting of Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour" is of little consequence; it is the themes, the message of the importance of self-assertion which the author wants to bring to the reader's attention. Setting is, on the other hand, a very important aspect of Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever" since it is the presence of the two older women before the grandeur of the Roman Forum that brings about their reminiscences and, ultimately, their climactic confessions. These two stories would, then, appear in different categories and would illustrate in their specific ways the elements of fiction. A third approach for presenting the stories is to place them by theme. In such a design, stories concerning the opposition of women might appear together, e.g., Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper," Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour," and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother'" Another group might include the theme of fantasy vs. reality: Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," and James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." One less teacher-centered way of making short story selections is to include the students in the selection process (Leki, 1986, pp.3-4). Students can brainstorm the

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names of authors they are familiar with (in the case of my classes, only American authors). Then the teacher could supply some biographical data about each author, furnish additional explanations about his or her works, and offer suggestions as to the appropriateness of that selection. This approach to the selection process would probably work best in an English class where there is no strict adherence to a required body of work.

The selection and arrangement of stories completed, a discussion of the six elements of fiction, plot, setting, character, point of view, style and theme, is then in order. Such discussion adds a vital dimension to the students' understanding of the structure of the short story. Armed with the knowledge that every story is more than just a plot line, students learn to search for meaning in a holistic fashion, examining all the elements of fiction as they apply to each work.

Before the students read a story—or at least before any class discussion begins—I present a brief overview of the author as a pre-reading activity. The key here is not to bore with detail but rather to spark interest by explaining the era in which the author lived and any interesting (read: scandalous) events attached to his/her life. Poe's marriage to his thirteen year old cousin, his bouts with alcoholism, and his severed relations with his adoptive father make good attention-getters. Likewise, the fact that Stephen Crane never bothered to marry " Mrs." Crane evokes smiles, as does Flannery O'Connor's penchant for raising peacocks.

Another important pre-reading detail is the list of questions and vocabulary which accompanies each story. The questions are designed to offer insight into the story, to address content rather than artistry. The Story and Its Writer has a separate instructor's manual with such questions for each story. The questions address characters' actions and mention specific, recurring words and phrases. They guide the students by pointing out details; in a way these questions provide the answers themselves. In Faulkner's "Dry September," for example, the town is oppressed by stifling heat, and the townspeople's nerves are on end, their tempers ready to flare. This fact is brought to the students' attention through this question: "What is the effect of all uncompleted statements?" and through further questions which lead the students back to the text for a closer look at the dialogue and the deeper significance of the characters' (particularly McLendon's) words. The vocabulary I present along with these questions is not in list form. I choose only those few pivotal words whose meanings are essential to the

understanding of the plot. Instead of taking the words out of context, I type the entire sentence, or more, and underline the chosen word. Then I type an explanation of that word as it relates to the meaning of that sentence and to the substance of the plot or theme. Thus students are not burdened with an overwhelming list of unrelated words to be defined and promptly forgotten at story's end.

Pre-reading aside, the next step is presentation of the short story itself. The key to enhancing student interest is variety of presentation and enthusiasm. But just as important is clarity of purpose. Ultimately the goal is to provide the students with freer access to the short story, that is to make comprehension of the short story easier for them, and more enjoyable. Over time, I have experimented with a large number of short stories and approaches to introducing them. The more successful techniques and strategies I have employed on certain stories are described below.

To ease the students into the concept of stories as literature, and to facilitate interpretation, I often choose to read in class a fable, such as Paul Bowles "The Hyena," as a ice-breaker. The themes of fables are usually obvious; besides, most students can relate to this abbreviated form, having been exposed to it in their own countries. A swapping of tales follows the reading and discussion of the fable, which helps students begin to feel at ease with their fellow classmates and with the prospect of analyzing short stories. The fable lends itself quite well to the teaching of literature. More ideas for employing it in the ESL classroom can be found in Marie Ponsot's book Beat Not the Poor Desk.

Reading to students, particularly to internationals, is a strategy I recommend employing from time to time. My students, after following along in their texts as I read, tell me that their comprehension has increased, and that my explanatory asides and native-speaker dramatic interpretation are of great help to them. Many short stories lend themselves to dramatic reading, but I find that with any story of more than ten pages it is difficult to maintain students' attention. Stories employing regional dialect and a lot of dialog are good candidates for oral presentation. Many of my students claim to get lost in the lines of dialog when those passages do not contain text-establishing clues like "he said" or "she replied." In addition, dialog is difficult for them to follow because so much of the true communication is not stated but implied, and reading between the lines is no easy matter for non-native readers. Among the most popular of the stories I have read aloud to my students is

Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path." The storyline is painfully straightforward and simply narrates the trek to town of a poor old Southern black woman who must get medicine for her disabled grandson. Yet when read aloud with the proper hint of pathos and a properly applied Southern accent, the story holds the students' interest and arouses their sympathies for the old woman.

Another means of introducing a short story is by way of a film or video. There are large numbers of short stories available on video now. The American Short Story Collection is available for rental in the larger video stores across the nation. The most complete guide to what is out in video form is the Video Source Book, 10th edition, 1989. Available in the reference section of most libraries, it is a guide to more than 54,000 video programs. Each alphabetical entry provides a surplus of information—from a description of the program to its rating, audience, purpose, distributor, availability for rental and/or purchase, etc. More information about this guide can be obtained from: Gale Research Inc., Book Tower, Dept. 77748, Detroit, MI 48277-0748. Other sources of nonprint materials include: Educator's Guide (to film, filmstrips, and tapes), Media Review Digest, The Film File, and International Index to Recorded Poetry.

The great advantage of using videos is that they provide visual and auditory aids to a multi-cultural group who bring a diverse set of preconceptions and perspectives to each short story. When reading American short stories, the native speaker's frame of reference and the author's are naturally in tune. But the mental pictures and cultural associations of international students often interfere with understanding the author's original intention. When reading Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," my students often assume that the narrator is a deranged male employee. When reading Jewett's "The White Heron," some students fail to appreciate the significance of the description of the little girl's surroundings, perhaps because these students have little knowledge of bucolic settings, and certainly no familiarity with Maine's landscape. Viewing a video of this story (Learning Corporation of America, 1987) allows students to see that the director has interpreted the short story very differently. By viewing story videos students learn to question their own analysis of a work and pay closer attention to details in the interpretation of the story. Not only do they learn that in literature there is a certain amount of flexibility, they also have the opportunity to literally see what they could not envision due to their cultural and geographic differences.

Among the videos that I find very useful are Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (Hollywood Home Theater, 1987). This short feature is a delight to ESL students since there is practically no dialog, just a nature's-eye view of a man escaping from death. Having read a detailed description of Farquhar's "escape," students seeing the video have the opportunity to marvel at the author's great talent for description. The students also get the chance to anxiously follow Farquhar's trail to freedom and to see how important it is for an author to establish an empathetic link between the reader and the characters. The video of Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour" (ISHTAR, 1982) is another fine example. Although the story itself is only three pages long, the video allows students to enter the mind of Mrs. Mallard and to follow her through flashbacks into her past and to live her fantasies of freedom. Through these flashes of insight, the students come to know her character better. Other videos I often employ include Faulkner's "Barn Burning" (American Short Story Series, 1980), O'Connor's "Good Country People" (Jeff Jackson,1975), Cather's "Paul's Case" American Short Story Series, 1980), and Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" (American Short Story Series, 1985). If literature "mirrors national culture and can therefore acquaint students with the aesthetic, moral, and spiritual values of [a] nation and the rules of [a] social system" (Spack, 1985, 705),then seeing that literature brought to life on film is an even more powerful mechanism for acculturizing students.

Because learning to analyze and interpret literature is an important objective in my classroom, I also use film independently of literature to show students that once their analytical skills are honed they will be able to employ them across other media. To prepare the students for a full-length film, a brief review of the elements of fiction may be useful. Plot, character, setting, and theme all translate well from one medium to another. Point of view and style may require further explanation. I point out different camera shots, such as the subjective view in which we, the audience see everything as if we were one of the characters. The examination of style calls for more subtlety, and the subject of style is one which I approach only topically even in our short stories. Students can best be informed of style throughout the work of an auteur, so Hitchcock's films are my preference. Helpful guides for interpreting this masterpiece are Hitchcock's Films by Robin Wood, and Filmguide to Psycho by Naremore. Before we view the film, I describe Hitchcock's style of directing, symbols the students should

look for, and recurring leitmotifs. After watching the first hour of the film, we discuss the elements of fiction as found in the film and predict what will transpire in the last half of the film. When the movie ends, the same procedure is repeated. Later in the semester, I ask the students, by way of review, to give me a brief overview of a film they have attended since our discussion on film, and they seem pleased that they can approach films with new powers of discrimination.

In teaching international students, teachers should also be apprised of the existence of close-captioned films, sometimes available through schools for the deaf. In addition, cable channels also offer a close-captioned service which might prove useful in an ESL literature course. The benefits of these subtitled, or close-captioned, films is that there is less chance of students' misunderstanding what is being said since the dialog is printed on the screen.

When film or video is not available, there are often books/short stories on tape to facilitate reading comprehension. Many of Ray Bradbury's short stories, for instance are available on tape. One which is particularly appropriate for ESL students, who are also in an "alien" land, is "Dark They Were and Golden Eyed," a story which involves the trials, tribulations, and eventual assimilation of an Earth family on the planet Mars. The story is narrated by Orson Welles and is only about 30 minutes in length. Poe's tales are also available on tape and are a definite aid in ESL reader's comprehension since Poe's style is unique and his vocabulary is sometimes archaic. Different versions of Poe's work exist, but one of the finest versions is narrated by Basil Rathbone and produced by Cadmon, the largest maker of spoken-word cassettes.

Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is also a favorite with students. A full length feature film, which only vaguely resembles the short story, was made in 1947. It derived from a radio play of the same name which is available on tape and is only about 30 minutes long. It, too, takes all sorts of liberties with the original story and requires special pre-listening preparation, yet it has entertainment value and some merit in that it allows students to see how Hollywood has revised an original work of fiction. This is a lesson to them in creative license and helps them see that original truths in literature are sometimes bent to fit a film image. The Walter Mitty cassette is volume 6 of series called Radiobook Cassettes and can be ordered through Radio/Video Yesteryear, Box C,Sandy Hook, CT 06482, or may possibly be gotten through publishers

Central Bureau. Also, just released is a collection called Selected Shorts: A Celebration of the Short Story. It includes William Hurt reading Richard Ford's "Communist," Anne Pitoniak reading Grace Paley's "A Conversation with My Father," and Jerry Stiller reading John Sayle's "At the Anarchist's Convention." This two-cassette set can be ordered for about $19.95 from Symphony Space, 2537 Broadway at 95th Street, New York, NY 10025.

Music can also be used creatively in teaching short stories. For instance, before we read Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," I play for my students two songs by Helen Reddy, "Delta Dawn" and "Angie Baby"; and one by the Beatles, "Eleanor Rigby." They are given a copy of the lyrics before we hear the songs and I hint to them to expect the themes of the songs to appear in their reading of Faulkner's story. The first of these songs, "Delta Dawn," tells the story of a peculiar forty-year-old spinster who, while awaiting the return of her lover long gone, remains under the dictatorial care of her father. The undertones of "Angie Baby" are of murder and necrophilia, and "Eleanor Rigby" is a song about an old maid still waiting for her prince Charming, or for a friend of any kind. Together these songs present a composite study of Faulkner's character, Miss Emily.

Role-playing is an often-suggested technique for teaching a story. With native speakers it may be more easily employed since most students can read aloud smoothly and are willing to use some amount of theatrics. International students are not so skilled and are hesitant to display their weaknesses to fellow classmates. My solution is to choose some of the more proficient readers, give them a script, and practice with them before class. I often use Wharton's "Roman Fever" for this. Although there is much dialog in the story, there is also a narrator, so I type up the story in play form, keeping the dialog, creating additional dialog in the original narration, and adding occasional stage directions. I choose two female students, present them with props such as old-fashioned hats, knitting needles, gloves, glasses, handbags, and then I work with them a couple of days before the script is to be read in class. The students seem to enjoy the play and are afterwards very ready for the discussion of the unfolding of the two characters' personalities in the dialog. A twist on this technique would be to have students prepare their own dialog of the scenes that do not appear in the story, i.e., the scenes that occur "offstage" but have obviously influenced the action (Gajdusek,1988, 252).

Yet another way to involve the students in the reading of short stories is to have them respond to the stories privately, each student keeping a literary journal. Sometimes class discussion doesn't adequately explain a story, whereas writing about what has been read often helps clarify the text. Through this discovery process, students often stumble onto important insights. For example, one of my students, while reporting the plot line of O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," discovered that numerology was a very important part of the story. The number of family members making the trip, he noted, matched the number of graves in the cemetery they passed. The number of times the grandmother was shot also matched the number of mistakes she had made which had lead to her family's murder. This approach is a part of response heuristics. Spak quotes Bleich as recommending that students be "asked to write, first, what they perceive in the text, and then how they feel about what they see [there], and finally what associations—thoughts and feelings—inform and follow their perceptions" (1985, 716). Journal entries need not be kept on each short story, but instead such journals might be viewed as prewriting activities to be employed only at the students' discretion.

Further activities and ideas about presenting literature—including novels and poems—can be found in Literature in the Language Classroom. Although this book was designed with adult, pre-university ESL students in mind, its many and varied activities could easily be adapted to other student groups.

Diversity of presentation is the most important aspect of instructional procedure. It fosters students' reading comprehension by equipping them with the tools for developing a deeper, more fulfilling understanding of literature. Literature exists in relationship to the greater world of common human experiences. Therefore, it is our charge as language teachers to help our students see how literature reflects that world, to help them to make sense of it, and to do so in a manner that challenges yet entertains.

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